

Life & Culture

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REVIEWS

Tiny Plays for Ireland Project Arts Centre, Dublin

As small as they are – an average three minutes of stage time – the plays commissioned from established writers and selected through an *Irish Times* competition by Fishamble's enticing experiment form some considerable volume.

Among 25 "playlets", each sliding into the other on Sabine Dargent's cruciform gangway around which we sit, not everything is easily absorbed. Viewed together, though, a picture emerges in dot matrix or pixilation of the shape of new writing, new ways of watching and, to some degree, the nation.

That nation, you may have noticed, is still reeling from debt, financial mishandling and austerity measures, and the plays here variously choose to reflect, lampoon or divert our attentions from its disorder – there are about 11 pieces you could call political satires, which feels proportional.

Joseph O'Connor's tone-setting introduction, *Safety Announcement*, actually takes all three approaches, when the performer Peter Daly is harassed for late mortgage payments, then rescued, stirring, by the mock heroics of theatre: "I warn you," he tells his bailiff, "these are trained actors."

They really have to be. For Daly, Don Wycherley, Steve Blount, Mary Murray and Kate Stanley Brennan – all superb – negotiating this many styles and voices so seamlessly requires great skill. For the audience, moving from the gently comic character sketch of Ardal O'Hanlon's *White Food*, to the brisk, impassioned drama of Rosaleen McDonagh's *Beat Him Like a Badger*, or the wickedly clever barrister comedy of Rachel Fehily's *Don't Take It Personally*, the 90 minutes are never boring, but eventually fatiguing.

If polyphony is the point, common territory can be revealing. With few exceptions, monologues are so over, as though it is no longer a time to talk to ourselves. The trend instead is either for cup-of-tea naturalism, with Deirdre Kinahan, Michael West, Jesse Weaver and Evan Lee D'Alton revealing whole lives in understated glimpses, or for arch absurdity, such as the merrily suicidal couple in Darren Donohue's recession-mocking *Tuesday Evening (Following the News)*, Colin Murphy's satirical bank bailout review *Guaranteed Irish*, or Michelle Read's depiction of the rise and fall of the economy as a night of spectacularly awkward sex in *The Nation's Assets*: "I think I'm overextended," groans the superb Wycherley.

Writing for stage, more so than writing for a competition, recognises what can only be completed in performance, something that Niamh Creely's *Commiserations* does beautifully, letting Brennan draw out its subtext in increasingly revealing gestures. Through it all, director Jim Culleton shifts gears and changes tack admirably, but his best manoeuvre is to thread Ciara Ni Chuir's neatly observed episode of urban young women adrift into Michael Cussen's study of missed opportunities among rural farmers, with a juxtaposition that benefits both. Given the tough task of providing a conclusion, Dermot Bolger goes for a clunky theatrical-illusion-as-metaphor-for-society motif ("believe again in lies being fed to you by confidence-tricksters, leaders and playwrights"), as though all experience could be neatly parcelled within one unifying voice. The intriguing question posed by Fishamble's multifaceted project, however, is whether it ever can be.

Runs until Mar 31

– Peter Crawley

Improbable Frequency Gaiety Theatre, Dublin

How do you solve a problem like Ireland? This is the mission of Tristram Faraday (Peter Hanly), a hotshot crossword solver turned British spy in the 1940s, and his creator, Arthur Riordan, who in 2004 first concocted this effervescent and ridiculously clever musical that is now in an entertaining revival at the Gaiety. But where Faraday has come to unravel cryptic emanations and strange reports from Dublin, a city apparently overrun with supercilious Brits and alcoholic Irish wits, Riordan understands the fun of the intricate and inexplicable.

"Is it smugness or insurgency? That makes them say Emergency?" complains one British spook of Irish neutrality during the second World War, and by making the cerebral yet pun-prone Myles na gCopaleen (Darragh Kelly) and the poetically flouncy John Betjeman (Rory Nolan) representatives of their respective countries, Riordan stitches such cultural clashes into the fabric of the show. Unlikely foils, perhaps, but these improbable coincidences provides a plot, a tone and a gallery of characters. Add Erwin Schrödinger to the mix, the Austrian physicist and apparent playboy, and the opportunity for daft cultural stereotypes and Kathy Strachan's hilariously fetching costumes multiplies.

Eight years on, the historical-political-literary-scientific-musical satire is somehow still an underpopulated genre, but Riordan's ideas still sparkle. Bell Helicopter's accomplished score of Weimar cabaret and Hispano-English parlour songs pumps and slinks along datelessly, and the wit and execution of Lynne Parker's direction keeps tickling the mind. New cast members bring fresh energy, with Stephanie McKeon's charming Philomena O'Shea delivering studied naivety, a voice of honeyed clarity and – delivered mid-coitus – the line of the show: "Infiltrated by British intelligence/Oxymoronic and also a sin."

The more significant change is one of expectation. Where once Parker's cabaret aesthetic made an ingenious virtue of economy, seeping performance into the auditorium and making up for lightly trained voices with Rory Nolan's brio or Cathy White's smoulder, it is now required to fill the expanse of the Gaiety's proscenium. To this end, Alan Farquharson augments the droll surprises of his set with a supple background video design, Sinéad McKenna's expert lights pulse around the auditorium, but another arresting spectacle – that of the musicians – is confined to the orchestra pit: a strange convention for something so contentedly unconventional.

This won't matter to anyone who has yet to



A performance of national assets

have the pleasure of Darragh Kelly's throaty, erudite introduction as na gCopaleen ("Oh, God, can't a man have a drink?"), ululating like a set of hungover uilleann pipes, or when you issue a forgiving groan to another pun made flesh within Riordan's relentlessly entertaining game of words. Working through the codes of wordplay and poetic metre, Hanly's mildly bewildered Faraday might finally, implausibly get to the bottom of everything. But the reason that *Improbable Frequency* is so richly worth revisiting is that Riordan and Rough Magic leave the peculiarities of Irish past and present contentedly unresolved.

Until Saturday

– Peter Crawley

La Sylphide Dublin Convention Centre

La Sylphide's launch in 1832 ushered in ballet's Romantic era. The women appeared ephemeral and otherworldly dancing in long white tutus, moving as if propelled by the supernatural. Ballet today accentuates the athleticism of the human body so much that even gliding off the floor seems realistic.

While the Monica Loughman Ballet accurately portrayed the femininity in the pivotal *La Sylphide*, her company's rendition often felt more earthly than transcendental. Loughman hired Elena Evseeva and Anton Korsakov of the Mariinsky Theatre to perform the leads in this ballet blanc (as the "white tutu" ones originally were called), and the pair merely hinted at the magic that must have marked the 1832 Paris Opera opening. That premiere made Marie Taglioni famous, and from then on, dancing en pointe became de rigueur for ballerinas across the world.

Loughman adapted a second version of *La Sylphide* for Dublin audiences – that of renowned Danish choreographer August Bournonville. He gained notoriety in the 19th century for making the most dramatic steps look effortless, and showcasing the men as much as the women in an art form where the ballerina reigned supreme.

Here, Evseeva's luxuriously long legs and expressive hands complement Korsakov's understated, impressive jumps, but her spirit lacks the enchantment necessary for believing she is the seductress causing the handsome James to jilt his bride. Loughman dances the forsaken Ellie with a supervisory presence.

The increasingly expanding corps appear polished throughout, offering distraction from the poorly taped music and engulfing venue. The performance of Aoife Shinnars as Madge exemplifies the challenges ahead: how a young company gaining experience will make the leap to presenting ballets full of the dynamism and athleticism prevalent in the more mature companies working today.

Tours during April

– Christie Taylor Seaver

**Let's Talk About Sam
Cork Opera House and Half Moon Theatre**

Emerging with a touch of Sam-fatigue from this Gaitkrash and Gare St Lazare Players Ireland weekend of six Beckett works, it's no surprise that one leaves the theatre wondering what's that old word for winding-sheets? Cerements? Cerecloths?



Top, Mary Murray and Peter Daly and, below, Mary Murray and Don Wycherley in Fishamble's production of *Tiny Plays for Ireland*. Above, Rough Magic's *Improbable Frequency* in full flow. Right, ballerina Monica Loughman, who is in *La Sylphide*. Photographs: Pat Redmond, Anthony Woods, Niall Carson/PA Wire

by Sarah Jane Shiels. A night later, it was followed by 160 minutes for the Beckett trilogy of *Mollay*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*. Around the corner at the Half Moon Theatre, Gaitkrash and Trace delivered *Play* introduced by a sound sequence merging sonorous, Tenebrae-like resonances. The programme was timed so that the Gare St Lazare production ended after Gaitkrash began, making it necessary to skip *The Unnamable* in order to catch *Play*; it provoked the thought that one can have too much even of a very good thing.

There is no doubt that Conor Lovett inhabits both the stage and the text with an intuitive mastery, allowing Beckett's wit as much licence as his despair; when in *First Love* the character says that he has lunched lightly in the graveyard there is a surrusion of anxiety in the audience: lunched on what, exactly? That audience is noticeably reduced for *The End*, where Lovett evokes the sense of tenacious bewilderment as compassionately as he does the writer's desultory misogyny.

Faithfully warming his way into the likeness of life for *Mollay* and *Malone Dies* on the following night, Lovett's chosen delivery of prolonged hesitations implies fault-lines beneath this mountainous memorisation.

While often funny, the constant self-correction becomes a kind of tic, something close to parody. Perhaps that's what Beckett is about in these musings, a ceaseless self-parody? Gaitkrash, Trace and James McCann delve not into Beckett's brain but into his entrails. Three decapitated torsos wrapped like mummies stand above a litter of more heads than there are necks. As the cerecloths (or cerements) are unwound, the trunks glitter with prescience but Shane Hegarty's lighting reveals them as urns topped by real if scabrous heads speaking in orchestrated staccato – possibly from beyond the crematorium – about adultery. Beckett hints metaphor and then says that you've got it all wrong, but mercifully Gaitkrash doesn't suggest that there's more to Beckett than Beckett intended. Sometimes there's an irresistible suspicion that there's less. *The End* tours until Mar 31

– Mary Leland

Grenades Bewley's Cafe Theatre, Dublin

Even the smallest detonations can have explosive consequences in Tara McKeivitt's considered monologue for Mephistro Productions. It begins with the young Nuala Kelly's recollections of her vociferous objections to her brother's crucifixion (inconveniently, he was the star of his Northern Irish school's passion play at the time), and leads steadily, from innocence to experience, towards graver sectarian upheaval.

We meet Emma O'Grady's nine-year-old in the cold recess of a prison waiting room in the late 1980s, where she artfully avoids saying how she came to be there. It is the trick of delayed explanation that works more easily in a radio play, which was the original form of McKeivitt's full-length debut, and director Caroline Lynch's production doesn't quite conceal those origins.

"A burst of laughter erupted around the room," says Nuala, and in the style of an essayist than a character, but it is one of few lapses in a script that treats its narrator's naivety without condescension. Duly reporting her teenage brother's ambitions to "devote his life to making women happy", her single mother's gossamer explanations for her father's absence, or her grandfather's equal-opportunities racism, Nuala becomes a credible witness when tragedy strikes, while McKeivitt elegantly shows how the layers of religious inculcation, childish bullying and adult collisions are all subtly related.

The guileless narrator could become an obvious device if it wasn't for two great strengths. The first is McKeivitt's communication of detail, deploying a lightness of touch, a wealth of warm humour and an admirable reticence to judge motivations: the grenades here are figurative and real, lobbed by Dalek-voiced nuns, bullying children, INLA gun-runners, or through cold revenge. The second strength is Emma O'Grady's extraordinary performance, unshowy with her childlike mannerisms and fiery with purpose.

Those skills combined evoke a world where words and munitions are used to wound, but resilience and sacrifice can still be used to heal. *Runs until Saturday*

– Peter Crawley

Oleanna Teachers' Club, Dublin

Since it first divided opinion in 1992, David Mamet's inflammatory two-hander has been regarded not so much as the dramatisation of a political power struggle but as a play about sexual harassment. Partly, the original context skewed its interpretation: it opened in the US shortly after sexual harassment allegations against Clarence Thomas, an associate justice of the US supreme court, emerged.

In *Oleanna*, a war of words escalates between an academic on the verge of tenure, dripping with absent-minded entitlement, and a student initially slow to grasp the nuances of liberal arts spiel but quick to determine insidious meaning behind ambiguous phrases. The question about the play, now facing Company D's Spartan staging, is whether Mamet's argument is delicately balanced or unnecessarily blunt.

"That's my job, don't you know," David Scott's academic, John, says. "To provoke you." Actually, that's Mamet's job, and although he begins here with the knotted tangles of

speech – the hermetic surge of rhetoric and the stutter of misapprehension whose photorealistic rhythms so challenge performers – his plotting slips towards vilification. When early audiences even applauded one violent crescendo, can director Ruth Calder-Potts now even the score? Attentive to the power of language, her production concentrates on its delivery. Scott, in jacket and sneakers, is allowed to be self-regarding and casually patronising, while Sinéad O'Riordan, pierced and studded, with her hair dyed cyberpunk plum, looks like she is taking a class in Advanced Stieg Larsson.

O'Riordan matches the look with a purposefully obtuse monotone, oddly effective for her character's literalism. Allied with Mamet's reactionary nods towards threatening young females and "politically correct" fascism (flush with power when her professor is fighting a rape charge, her "group" demands the banning of his book), she seems easily demoralised.

That may be why Calder-Potts hands the stage to Scott, who never leaves it even during costume changes. Although O'Riordan is commendably ambiguous with her final utterance, we are left with the slightly unsettling feeling that for all the play's insistence that we should question authority, received wisdom and surface appearance, the production lets Mamet off pretty easily.

Runs until Saturday

– Peter Crawley

Ó hAodáin, RTÉ NSO/Minczuk NCH, Dublin

Wagner – *Siegfried's Rhine Journey*
Strauss – Horn Concerto No 1
Bruckner – Symphony No 7

Seldom is the work of Richard Strauss the lightest music of an evening. But here, his youthful Horn Concerto No 1 was pitted against some formidable heavyweight works of German Romanticism. By way of a taster for the symphony programme, a pre-concert organ recital (presented by Pipeworks festival) included Max Reger's thundering Second Sonata of 1901. Organist and Reger aficionado David Adams despatched its superabundance of notes with a mixture of athletic discipline and Gothic melodrama.

Paying a return visit to the NCH was Brazilian guest conductor Roberto Minczuk, whose recent measures to overhaul the Orquestra Sinfônica Brasileira have caused considerable controversy. Still, there wasn't a breath of disharmony to be detected in his dealings with the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra.

On the contrary, a highly polished account of *Siegfried's Rhine Journey* showed Minczuk's real feeling for the lustrous textures of Wagner. There was energetic precision, too, in the more modern scoring of the Strauss concerto, where soloist Cormac Ó hAodáin – despite a few fluffs of the kind that are an occupational hazard for horn players – valiantly kept pace and poise. Neither conductor nor orchestra could be held entirely responsible for the deflated conclusion to Bruckner's Symphony No 7. Rather than being intent on rescuing the finale from its own fragmented argumentation, Minczuk appeared resigned to it.

His approach was altogether more persuasive in the lengthy opening movements, where assured paragrapping and finely differentiated tempos meant that the vast *Adagio* in particular seemed not a minute too long.

– Andrew Johnstone